

# Obituaries

## John Fryer

The “masked, gay, anonymous psychiatrist” who helped to get homosexuality declassified as a mental illness

John Fryer was a huge man in size and reputation. In a speech described by gay activists as a “watershed moment” in the history of gay liberation, Fryer addressed the 1972 convention of the American Psychiatric Association in Dallas, Texas, wearing an enormous wig, a rubber head mask, and an oversized tuxedo, and using a voice distorting microphone. He stunned the standing room only audience of his colleagues, saying: “I am a homosexual. I am a psychiatrist.”

At the time of Fryer’s speech, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* listed homosexuality as a mental illness; electric-shock aversion therapy was still prescribed for gay men and lesbians, and if their sexuality was discovered it often meant job loss.

Fryer, introduced as “Dr H Anonymous,” delivered his own form of shock therapy to the psychiatric world when he told the audience that gay psychiatrists were forced to deal with “nigger syndromes”—facing bigotry similar to black people. He said he could not reveal who he was for fear of losing his job and medical licence.

Frank Kameny, a Harvard astronomer who had been fired from his job with the US Army Maps Service because he was gay, appeared with Fryer on the platform at the American Psychiatric Association’s Dallas convention. He had never seen Fryer and knew him only as the “masked, gay, anonymous, psychiatrist.” Kameny said that Fryer’s speech had a “profound impact” on what many gay men and lesbians were attempting to do collectively—to remove homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*’s list of mental illnesses.

In 1973, the year following Fryer’s speech, the American Psychiatric Association’s board of trustees voted to remove homosexuality from its list of mental illnesses—leading one newspaper to announce, “Homosexuals gain instant cure.” Barbara Gittings, a gay rights activist who had convinced Fryer to speak at the 1972 convention, said that he had helped to bring about the change: “His speech shook up psychiatry. He was the right person at the right time.”



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Katherine Fryer Helmbock, Fryer’s sister, said, “To people who knew John, this was only one of the many things he did, but changing *DSM* [*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*] was a momentous thing. This label, mental illness, was one of the bases for treating gay people badly. This took away a huge cudgel used against gay people for so many years.”

Fryer, who was forced out of his third year of residency at the University of Pennsylvania when it was discovered that he was gay, had insisted on delivering his Dallas speech in disguise not only through fear for his job. It was also “a bit of calculated theatre,” said Barbara Gittings. Flamboyant and outspoken, Fryer often used a bit of theatre to good effect. At a 1974 meeting of the International Work Group on Death, Dying, and Bereavement, a group that he had founded, Fryer wore dashikis—vividly patterned African shirts—and kept order by banging a ceramic cow bell.

Fryer, who described himself as a Kentucky “farm boy,” could be gruff and even combative at times. “He was bright, visionary, and unafraid to speak his mind,” said Mary Barber, president of the American

Association of Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists. “It may be that very gruffness, that lack of fear, that allowed him to step up to the plate at a time when no other psychiatrist would.”

Dame Cicely Saunders, president and founder of St Christopher’s Hospice in London, and a lifelong friend of Fryer’s, said, “He was a fascinating and very stimulating person—sometimes as much by what you disagreed with him about as what you agreed with.” Dame Cicely had first met Fryer in 1970 when she spoke at Yale during a visiting lectureship. They remained in close touch and in 1980–1, at Dame Cicely’s invitation, Fryer took a year-long sabbatical from his post as professor of psychiatry at Temple University in Philadelphia to help restructure the education department at St Christopher’s. “He was very definite about our priorities. He wanted to teach the teachers that death is a time of great potential and that we should give the patient as much control as possible,” Dame Cicely said.

During his famous 1972 speech, Fryer spoke directly to the “more than a hundred [gay] psychiatrists” he claimed were registered at the convention, urging them to find ways to help change the attitudes of both heterosexual and homosexual patients towards homosexuality. He warned them that it would be risky, but added, “We are taking an even bigger risk, however, not accepting fully our own humanity, with all the lessons it has to teach all the other humans around us and ourselves. This is the greatest loss: our honest humanity.”

He was being treated for diabetes and pulmonary sarcoidosis at the time of his death. [JEANNE LENZER]

*John Fryer, former professor of psychiatry Temple University, Philadelphia, United States (b Winchester, Kentucky, 1937; q Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, 1962), died from gastrointestinal bleeding on 21 February 2003.*

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## Timothy Greville Ashworth

*Consultant histopathologist Walsgrave Hospital, Coventry, 1977-95 (b 1931; q Cape Town 1956; DCP), died from a ruptured dissecting aneurysm of the aorta, causing cardiac tamponade, on 3 September 2002.* He held various posts at the University of Rhodesia and Nyasaland before moving to England in 1977. As consultant histopathologist at Walsgrave Hospital, Coventry, he recognised the virtue of medical laboratory scientific officers performing the "cut up" procedure, thus saving the valuable time of consultant pathologists. After clinical pathology accreditation was denied to Walsgrave because of this practice, he had an article published in the *BMJ* (1994;309:417) expressing his views on the issue. This caused a furore, but after much debate the Royal College of Pathologists sanctioned a practice that had been considered unthinkable only a few years before. He leaves a wife, three children, and a granddaughter. [TAPAS GUHA]



He then took various medical posts all over the UK, before settling in Leicester, where he worked as a singlehanded general practitioner in a large inner city practice. He was a prominent member of local Asian society, and was involved in improving the conditions of the immigrant community. He leaves a wife; four children; and three grandchildren. [NAHID LATIF]

## Viner Nicholl Leyshon

*Chief medical officer of health Derby 1947-73 (b Swansea 1910; q London 1936), d 30 December 2002.*

Viner Leyshon grew up in Swansea with a love of learning and also of the sea. The first of these took him to King's College London, and later into research on irradiation of blood. He went into public health medicine in 1939 working in Dewsbury, Blackpool, and Yarmouth. Ironically, for a man so at home in seaports, he spent most of his career in landlocked Derby. A man of plain and forthright manner, he consorted comfortably with the likes of Aneurin Bevan and Enoch Powell. [STEPHEN WILMOT]

## Henry Ronald Playfair

*Former general practitioner Plymouth (b Morphee, Kincardineshire, 1926; q London Hospital 1949; FRCP, FRCS), died from a ruptured aortic aneurysm on 7 December 2002.*

After house jobs in Plymouth and Chichester he joined a practice in Plymouth, where he remained a partner until 1980. He was instrumental in the development of undergraduate and vocational training for general practice in the south west and the Plymouth area in particular. In 1980 he moved to take up a position at the Department of Health, where he worked until his retirement in 1991. He was a keen but not often successful follower of the horses and enjoyed fly fishing. He leaves a wife, Dorothy; two sons; and four grandchildren. [JAMES PLAYFAIR]

## Ramasamy Selvam

*Former head department of medical biochemistry, Post-Graduate Institute of Basic Medical Sciences, Taramani, Madras, India (b 1947), d 20 February 2002.*

Professor Ramasamy Selvam carried out pioneering work on the role of free radicals

in initiating kidney stone disease and established kidney stone matrix proteins as a diagnostic marker for the disease. This resulted in the award of 24 PhD and 34 MPhil degrees. He was president of the Urolithiasis Society of India, a scientific consultant for various organisations, and chairman of the board of studies at the University of Madras. He leaves a wife, Geetha, and two children. [BIJI T KURIEN]

## Ivor Sevitt



*Former general practitioner Eltham, south east London (b Dublin 1918; q Trinity College Dublin 1946), died from Parkinson's disease on 25 October 2002.*

After house jobs in Banbury, he joined the late Maurice Taylor in setting up the Sherard Road Surgery, one of the first to employ a full time receptionist/secretary. He also worked as a clinical assistant to a consultant physician, and researched and lectured on the effects of beta blockers in senile tremor. He was a keen caravanner and secretary of the Irish-Jewish Medical Society. He leaves a wife, Ann; three children; and seven grandchildren. [MARTIN HYATT]

## Marjorie Paula Thomas



*Former consultant paediatric surgeon Adelaide Children's Hospital, Australia (b 1931; q Manchester 1957; FRCS Ed, FRACS), died from ischaemic heart disease on 7 January 2003.*

After house jobs in Manchester, Paula worked in the north west of England and Australia. Appointed as a consultant paediatric surgeon in Adelaide in 1976, she set up a parenteral nutrition service for children and was recognised as one of the pioneers in this field. She returned to live in England in 1981 and worked in general practice. [CHRIS THOMAS]

## Lewis Gillanders



*Professor emeritus of radiology Aberdeen (b 1925; q Glasgow 1947; FRCP, FRCS, FRCRCSI (hon)), died from Alzheimer's disease on 24 December 2002.*

After two years in the Royal Army Medical Corps, he worked as a general practitioner in his father's practice in Cromarty and later in Invergordon. He trained in radiology in Glasgow and later worked in Birmingham. In 1958 he was appointed consultant radiologist in Aberdeen and in 1964 became consultant in charge of radiology services in Grampian. He established the two year course leading to the diploma in radio-diagnosis (Aberdeen). He was awarded a personal chair in radiology in 1977 and retired in 1988. From 1979 to 1984 he served on the General Medical Council. He leaves a wife, Nora; two children; and five grandchildren. [IAN GILLANDERS]

## Abdul Latif

*General practitioner Leicester 1973-98 (b Chittagong, Bangladesh, 1929; q Dhaka, Bangladesh, 1959; DTM&H), d 12 February 2003.*

After qualifying, he came to the United Kingdom in 1964 to study at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.